

Psalm 121

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[0:00] Good morning. Please turn to Psalm 121. Psalm 121. We're working through this little book, Walking with God by Richard Phillips, and he's taking a psalm per chapter, and he's taking a psalm per chapter.

The next story of Jacob and Esau, and after Jacob had stolen the birthright through deceit and lying from Esau, you remember that he was then on the run. He fled because his brother Esau became so angry, he vowed to kill him.

And Jacob was a homebody, we are told, and he stayed near the house. He was probably conjecturing, maybe more shy. It's likely he had never been this alone before in his entire life, at the point that he fled to try to find his uncle Laban.

And as he fled, God met with him. He met with this deceiving, lying Jacob and his sovereign purposes.

And God said to Jacob, I am with you, and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

[1:34] You know, as I have read such verses in the Old Testament, has the thought ever crossed your mind, it has mine, that, you know, it would be great if God would just come personally to me and give me such a word.

I mean, it just, you know, him to me, give me such a promise, such an encouragement. Because boy, you could just go on then, with that word of encouragement.

Well, Christian, that is precisely what God has done for us in Psalm 121. In this passage, the Hebrew word shamar, if I'm pronouncing that correctly, not being a Hebrew student.

As I was preparing this morning, I almost thought about being a Greek student, but no, this is Hebrew. It's found six times in verses 3 through 8, and it's translated keep or watch.

You know, we often hear of the expression, your guardian angel. You know, your guardian angel was watching over you in that instance. And while the Bible does refer to guardian angels, we must remember that they're finite creatures, and surely more powerful, much more powerful than us.

[2:54] Nonetheless, they have much the same limitations that we do. They are not infinite. They are not all-knowing. They are not all-wise. They can only be in one place at once.

And if my entire life and eternity was dependent upon my guardian angel getting me through, I'd have reason for some fears and doubts, wouldn't I?

But Psalm 121 points us to a much more secure protector. And that, of course, is God who watches over us. If I'm God's child, I have a guardian God watching over me.

Read along with me as I read through Psalm 121, starting in verse 3. He will not let your foot slip. He who watches over you will not slumber.

Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord watches over you. The Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.

[3:57] The Lord will keep you from all harm. He will watch over your life. The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore. Let's return back to the start of the psalm and answer a question.

And that question is, what two places can we turn for help? And as we look at verse 1, we see that the psalmist says, I lift up my eyes to the hills.

And then asks, where does my help come from? And then he answers, my help comes from the Lord. What two places can our help come from?

Well, first of all, the hills. John Calvin comments, by the mountains, the psalmist means whatever is great or excellent in the world. And isn't this so often the case?

First, we look at the horizontal. We look out, whether it's confidence in our own self, our abilities, our strength, our bank accounts, our retirement, our job, our family.

[5:05] We look out the figurative hills that are around us. And when they fail, and we have nowhere else to turn, then it seems we look up, and we declare, almost surprisingly, oh, my help comes from the Lord.

Phillips comments, it is when our earthly hope fails that our hearts remember to look to the Lord. Well, I want to digress for a moment and ask a question, and I'd like to start it for our younger members among us, those who are not married.

So get on your thinking caps. If they're completely stumped, we'll let the rest of you chime in. But for those of you who are not yet married, how will you learn whether that guy or girl that's so handsome or pretty is right for you and is going to keep you happy for the rest of your life?

There's going to be someone you're going to want to cherish growing old with. Or to put it a different way, what characteristics will matter most to you in that person five or ten years from now? What do you think?

Faith. Okay. Want to expand on that a little? Okay, being a Christian. That will definitely matter five or ten years from now.

[6:27] Because if they're not a Christian, you aren't going to have a God working inside of them, sanctifying them and making them more and more like Christ. And certainly by five years from now, you will learn that you will never be able to change them from the outside.

What else? Yes, add one of our younger members. No, go ahead. They seem stumped. Okay, we're looking for a close friend.

Anything else going to be important? Love. Love. Rachel? Okay. Let's expand. What do we mean by love?

That ooey-gooley feeling? You're feeling for that beautiful or handsome young woman or young man right now? Okay, commitment.

Commitment. Ladies, anything else matter in your man now that you're married 15 years? Does it matter whether you have a roof over your head?

[7:29] Boy, it's quiet. You're all afraid to say anything. Okay, let's return to the young people. Be nice if they had a job.

Very wise young woman. Yes. Just any job? I mean, does it matter if they're hardworking?

Certainly it would matter if they're hardworking, wouldn't it? What if they're lazy? They can't hold a job. Would that matter to you 10 years from now, young ladies? I think it will.

They'll become great contention if they are in that state. What about the way they do their work? Is that going to matter? Does it matter whether they do it shoddy or do it with excellence?

You ask your husband, ladies, to repair that drain, and it leaks more when he's done than when he started. Jim says that's why he calls somebody.

[8:30] Okay. How about perseverance? Will you get frustrated?

Men, if your woman has started 1,500 jobs and none of them are done, or vice versa, are any of these characteristics important? If they're important, then I again ask and return to, how do you know in that 20-year-old or 22-year-old or 25-year-old person that you've had candlelight dinners with, whether they have any of those characteristics?

Any way? Yes. Time together in all sorts of situations to see what's really there. Okay. Time together in all sorts of situations to see what's really there.

Very good. One of the things I've often spoken to my children is, especially my girls, go observe that man you're interested in working.

Watch him work. Does he stand around and talk all the time? Does he take a break every 10 minutes? How excellent does he do his work? Those things are very important.

[9:48] They are going to reveal more than 50 candlelight dinners. Because they're going to tell you what he's like. Yes, Jim. Well, Dave, we're going to go back a few years now, because man, I have to assume he's celebrating 30 years.

Thanks, Lord. But when you're talking about this, I remember the first time I met her, I got to know her in a little way. She struck me as a person, and I didn't really know her that well, but just her mannerisms. She seemed like a person.

I wanted to get to know her better, because she seemed like she had her act together. Okay. Does that make any sense to you? Yes. And it is exactly more, sir, because I just... What am I supposed

to say?

No? I don't know what you're saying. It's just, you know, feelings we get sometimes about somebody we don't know all that well, but it's just, do I want to say, signals that they kind of give out, and we kind of get an idea.

Like you said, you said all them candlelight dinners together. By the way, there's nothing wrong with candlelight dinners. But let's go on before I get in trouble.

[10:55] Returning to Psalm 121, the psalmist declares that our help comes from the Lord. And we must ask, is that good or bad? I mean, who is this God?

Who is the Lord? Didn't Pharaoh ask the same question? He said, who is the Lord that I should obey him? Well, that was a good question. Bad timing. But a good question.

And Pharaoh found out who the Lord was, didn't he? How did God reveal to Pharaoh who he was? Well, yes, he told him, but he did more than tell him.

Didn't he take the works of his creation and what he had made and what he had control over and sovereignly ruled and take those works and do extraordinary things with him?

Pharaoh was allowed by God to see this great Lord do some work in front of him. And so he learned exactly who the Lord was.

[11:55] So again, in returning to Psalm 121, he doesn't just say, it's me, the Lord. He follows up the answer by challenging us to look at his handiwork and to learn a little better who this God is.

So who is it that's our helper? Oh, just the maker of heaven and earth. The one who with a word created the universe with hundreds of billions of stars contained within hundreds of billions of galaxies.

The one who with another word formed millions of different creatures, some containing billions or even trillions of individual cells, with each one of those cells containing about 200,000 proteins. Indeed, each of those cells is a mini-city buzzing with activity that when we try to peer inside of it into this infinitesimally infinitesimally little piece of matter.

We are just awestruck with wonder. Even the evolutionist is mind-boggled by the amazement of the working therein. Who is this God?

[13:10] Well, he's in all places at all times. He sees and knows all things simultaneously.

Someone was recently telling us about their son who could listen to and comprehend multiple conversations going on in the same room at the same time and they could be working on their computer at the same time.

Amazing. The mind God has given some of us but our God can do one better or infinitely better. He can listen to all conversations going on at all times in other rooms besides the room we're in.

In fact, he has perfect knowledge of every conversation going on in every location all the time. He even has perfect knowledge of every thought and motive and intent occurring in every heart of every person every moment in the past right now and forever into the future.

You see, our God can never become distracted with such knowledge. Someone might wonder even though God may know all things is he wise enough to know the best thing to do in every situation. Again, let's look at his works. In his words, he tells us, yes, he is all wise but how wise is our God? Again, he's the maker of heaven and earth.

[14:31] He's the one that put all of this together in such fine-tuned precision vision. And we could spend weeks, months, years, eternity looking at all that he has done and made and just be in wonder of the wisdom to bring it all together.

But there's more. Not only is he omnipresent, he's everywhere at all times. Not only does he have omniscient knowledge, not only is his wisdom incomprehensibly perfect, he has all power to do whatever his omniscient, all wise will determined should be done.

All of the creation we can now observe and explore came into being with a single word. Why did God do that? Like we saw in the movies a few weeks ago, why did he create entire galaxies that were a pinpoint of light in the sky before telescopes?

Or groupings of galaxies that were a pinpoint of light as a grouping? Or that we couldn't even see until we had telescopes? Or that we couldn't even see with telescopes and until we saw had the Hubble telescope?

It goes on and on. Isn't it partly to show us just who this great God is? A little bit of his works?

[16:02] Ultimately, it's just an expression of who he is. When he does work, he does it right. And so, everything he does in his work is going to show us a little sliver of who he is as a person.

So, let's return again to the original question. Where does my help come from? The answer, it comes from the Lord, the maker, of heaven and earth.

This is help that can be delivered without limitation. Help that provides the best possible answer to every need at hand. Help that will be perfectly good and right.

But before we move on, if you're a child of God, what is required to rest within the arms of this great helper? Isn't it simply to know him?

Jesus said it. Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. Let me ask another penetrating question, at least for me.

[17:10] When we study the attributes of God, is such a study a dry exercise for us? If so, maybe it's because he's not your helper.

Studying the statistics related to our military capabilities may be an exercise of dry boredom to the high school student preparing for an exam. But I guarantee you for the soldier on the front line who's getting a pre-battle orientation of the arsenal available to him with a call on the radio, it's the stuff that emboldens his courage and gives him confidence.

It's all the difference in the world whether we're in the battle and we have a need to draw upon this arsenal or whether it's just dry facts out there about something unrelated to us.

When we look upon God's handiwork, when we study his awesome attributes, if it doesn't make our souls well with joy, with pride in this great God, with wonder, develop within us faith and hope and trust, then we have to ask ourselves, is he my personal God?

Well, we've considered who our helper is. I want to now transition to consider God's activity as our vigilant protector. And we'll spend the rest of the lesson on this.

[18:37] God's activity as our vigilant protector. We're going to examine his activity as our protector under four main headings. First, he will not let your foot slip.

Second, he will not slumber or sleep. Third, he is our shade and covering. And fourth, he will keep you from all harm. So first, he will not let your foot slip.

find that in verse 3, the first half of verse 3 of this Psalm 121. And the reference reminds us of Psalm 37.

If the Lord delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm. Though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand.

Pastor John recently used the imagery of a sumo wrestler planning his feet being immovable. Allow me to change the picture a little.

[19:37] You got this little seven-year-old bully pushing around this five-year-old next-door neighbor. He keeps pushing him down to the ground. And it just so happens that the five-year-old has a father who is a sumo wrestler.

And the 450-pound man comes over and grasps each hand of his five-year-old son. Do you think there is a chance in the world that that boy will ever hit the ground again, no matter how much the seven-year-old neighbor pushes him?

I don't think so. As we've already seen, our God is infinitely bigger than any sumo wrestler. And those whose hands he has chosen to hold will never be knocked off their feet.

He doesn't promise to clear the path of everything that could make us fall. Indeed, we may stumble. Misfortune could blindside us.

Sudden change can leave us feeling overwhelmed. A heavily load will make us groan and shrink beneath it. Our greatest enemy, sin, will threaten to completely undo us.

[20:51] But just as a young child whose hand is firmly clasped in his father's hand may stumble along the way as they're walking along the path, the father effortlessly holds him up.

For any of you who have been parents, as you walk along the path of the woods and your little son or daughter stumbles and is about to hit the ground, you just instinctively pull up, pull up.

They never hit the ground as long as you're holding their hand. It's effortless for you and our God is the one holding our hand. But some may object and say, why do some fall?

Christians often do fall. We can't go very far without hearing about believers, sadly often prominent ones, who fall into sexual sin, greed, or some other grievous temptation.

Is a true believer guaranteed to never fall? Well, to be sure, he will never fall so far as to fall out of God's grace. John 6, 39, and this is the will of him who sent me, that I will lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up on that last day.

[22:06] Or Philippians 1, 6, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, we can still scrape our knees or break an arm or break a leg, and we have to ask, why?

And the answer is because we've chosen to wander from the protective care of our Heavenly Father. How do we wander from his care? It would be again like that child walking along with us on the path, and he pulls away from the Father because he sees something out in the woods. And the Father lets him go, and he goes off to satisfy his curiosity, and as he does, he stumbles and falls and scrapes up his knees. We are prone to wander.

How easily we can set our eyes on the hills, on power, on pleasure, on worldly success, on our own strength and ability. And when we do, we've pulled ourselves away from our Father's protective grasp as we lean more and more on our own strength.

And so in such a state, we're vulnerable indeed, and we can trip and fall. We've shunned our Father's care, and he may well let us become scraped up with this world's consequences to remind us of our weakness and great need for him.

[23:29] But here's a revealing question. What do we do after the fall? Separated from his dad, the child may go off in the woods and scrape himself up, but as he's bawling and he picks himself up, he's going to instinctively run back to his dad, who's going to be there, to once again embrace him and dry his tears.

After falling into sin, do we come running back in tears to our Heavenly Father's arms? Do we acknowledge to him our rebellion and idolatrous self-sufficiency?

Do we seek his forgiveness and then firmly plan our hand back in his before beginning our stroll down the path of life once again? No good father would turn his back on a bruised, crying son, and neither will our Heavenly Father turn his back on us when we come running back in his presence. As we take his hand and clasp it around our own, he will look down upon us with a smile and he will tighten the grip.

We have a picture of this in John 10. I give them eternal life and they will never perish. No one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all and no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

[24:48] Secondly, God is our vigilant protector in that he will not slumber or sleep. Verses 3b and 4.

He who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Israel will never slumber nor sleep. This psalm was called the Song of Ascents and was likely sung as people made their way up to Jerusalem.

I've never been to Israel. But just out of curiosity, I jumped onto Google Earth and flew over to Jerusalem and got down to ground level and kind of wound my way along to try to get a picture of what it must have been like coming up to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem isn't this city perched on a high mountain with jagged cliffs on all sides like you might see in some of your European calendars of castles.

Rather, it's the highest point of a series of hills that keep coming up from one side from the Mediterranean, which of course is at sea level, and then from the other side, for instance, where Jericho is at, which is also at sea level, the distance from the Mediterranean to Jerusalem is a much larger distance, and so probably most of the people that would be coming up to Jerusalem, it looked like if the elevations were correct on Google Earth, started at about 1,600 feet.

[26:19] So they'd be ascending about 1,000 feet as they sang this Song of Ascents. Those coming from the side of Jericho had the full 2,600 feet to go. But what struck me was all of the mountains or large hills leading up to the city of Jerusalem kind of reminded me like driving through Kentucky without any forests.

And so probably the roads wound their way through these valleys, at least the ones today do, and on either side you'd have for hundreds of feet these hills going up.

And that created a significant problem of safety for those journeying up to Jerusalem. So picture them, they're on this road in this valley that winds through, and the imagery of the psalm seeks to pull from this experience, and so you have this caravan that has made its way and they've camped along the way and as Phillips comments, as darkness falls, sentries are posted, but they only do their job effectively if they remain awake and ready.

If they fall asleep, they will put their people in danger. So likewise for us, we've got many dangers, troubles on every side from which we need protection.

Again, Christians cannot bypass the troubles endemic in this fallen world. Again, Jesus said, in this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world.

[28:07] We can suffer deep waters of sickness, of chronic pain and illness, from which we may never be delivered in this life. We can have unsympathetic bosses, we can lose our jobs without warning, we may be slandered, we could be robbed or victimized in any way.

Jesus summed it up well in Matthew 24, you will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.

Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. The idea that Christians are going to somehow live above the fray is just purely folly.

What was the lot of those heroes of the faith? Listen to a little bit of Hebrews 11. And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised, who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword, whose weakness was turned to strength, and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

Women received back their dead, raised to life again. But then others were tortured and refused to be released so that they might gain a better resurrection.

[29:40] Some faced jeers and flogging while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned. They were sawed in two. They were put to death by the sword.

They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted, and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and in holes in the ground.

These were all commended for their faith. No, Scripture paints no picture of us living above the fray. If we were to open it up for discussion this morning, I'm sure we could go right around the room and listen to trial after trial after trouble that we are each living within, and we probably wouldn't have to go back many days or weeks.

Many times we can't even see around the corner, let alone what's in store for us tomorrow or next week. We are made to feel our utter weakness and helplessness, but it is in the imagery of this danger that we are reminded of our God's great faithfulness.

Our guardian God never slumbers nor sleeps when darkness gathers around us. He's ever vigilant. He's never going to let anything pass through him that can truly harm us.

[31:01] Thirdly, he is our shade or covering, and this is found in verses 5 and 6. The Lord watches over you. The Lord is your shade at your right hand.

The sun will not harm you by day nor the moon by night. This reference may allude back to the Exodus when God made his protection over his people visual through a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire.

There's many lessons undoubtedly that came to the mind of the Israelites as they sang this song of ascents going up to Jerusalem. First, the hostile environment through which their forefathers passed.

Phillips comments, the Sinai Desert is one of the most hostile climates on earth. During the day, the temperatures climb to well over 100 degrees. When darkness falls, it may plunge to below freezing. God did not remove his people from the hostile environment. Likewise, God does not promise to take us out of our hostile environment.

[32:08] But he does promise to protect us as we pass through the trials. Second, the Exodus was a reminder of God's ability to provide for every need.

We read in Exodus 16 where Moses instructed Aaron at the instruction of God to take a jar and put an omer of manna in it then place it before the Lord to be kept for the generations to come.

He wanted what happened there to be a reminder of God's ability to care for his people. And what was his ability? What did he do? Well, he struck a rock in the middle of a desert to quench their thirst to cause a river of water to flow out.

He provided manna for them in the middle of the desert for a few days or weeks or, what, about 40 years? Every day providing so much so that they took it for granted.

He's able to faithfully provide for us day by day. Third, the Exodus was a reminder of our necessary position of obedience within God's provision.

[33 : 16] Yes, Israel was under God's protection, but it was a state of absolute obedient protection. When that pillar of cloud stopped, they stopped.

When it went forward, they pulled up the stakes and they went forward. When it stopped again, they stopped. They camped as long as it stayed. And when it moved, they moved again.

They were truly like sheep being led by their great father, heavenly father, shepherd. Who was caring for them? And like sheep, we must follow our shepherd with such diligent, complete obedience.

Fourth, the Exodus was a reminder of God's compassionate faithfulness. Let me just read Nehemiah 9.19. Because of your great compassion, you did not abandon them in the desert. By day, the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. Have you ever wondered if God would abandon you because of your sin or unfaithfulness to him?

[34 : 26] Many times the thoughts pass through my mind, how much more will you put up within me, Lord? And yet, such a story as the Exodus is such a gracious reminder of our gracious God.

Who was it that Nehemiah was writing about here? Was it not unfaithful Israel, most of which would never enter the promised land? And yet, God continued to exercise patience with him.

Was it not those who would never ever know his blessing on the other side, but two? Yet, God did not let a day go by without caring for their every need, again, for 40 years.

Fourthly, and lastly, God's activity as a vigilant protector, he will keep you from all harm. He will keep you from all harm, and this is found in verses 7 and 8.

The Lord will keep you from all harm. He will watch over your life. The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore. This is the pinnacle of this psalm of ascents.

[35 : 37] It's the culminating statement, the summary statement. Throughout the whole of our life, in all coming and going, the Lord is ready to ensure that no real harm is going to come our way.

The key words here is no real harm. Returning again to the illustration of a boy who's pulled himself away from his father's grasp to explore the woods, do you think that if that boy and father were standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon, that that boy would ever be able to pull himself away from the grasp of his father?

Having been a dad, I can guarantee you in being to the Grand Canyon, that no, they would not. Because when their life is truly in danger, it's not a time to let them go to experience life's bumps and bruises.

It's the time to hold on tight. God may choose to let us have our own way at times and even fall into some very grievous sin. We need to look no further than David to see an occurrence of this.

But if we are truly God's child, scripture is emphatic on the point that he will never let us plunge ourselves irreversible into the way of damnation, any more than that loving father would allow his son to pull away from him when danger is so close.

[37 : 03] This thought is captured with the words, he will watch over your life, for as the King James puts it, he will preserve thy soul. When our life is in danger, and not our physical life, but our soul, then God guarantees that he will preserve it.

The same idea is again echoed by Paul in Romans 8. After considering every trouble, every problem that could come our way, he concludes, for I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If God set his love upon us, if he has begun a good work in you, then you can be assured that he's going to get the job done.

Hebrews 7.25, therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him because he always lives to intercede for them. But Hebrews 7.25 declares the reason we are secure, it is because of the action, I'm sorry, because of the active, ongoing work of our blessed Savior, Jesus Christ.

Psalms 121 declares, the Lord will watch over your coming and going. Jesus picked up this same language in the New Testament when he declared at the end of the illustration of the sheep and him being, or the sheep pen, he says, I am the gate, whoever enters through me will be saved, he

will come in and go out and find pasture.

[38:52] How long can we count on this promise? Well, both now and forever more. God will not only see us to death's door, he will see us through the river that leads to the celestial city.

And not only will he lead us up the opposite bank, he will protect us forever more. There will be no end to this protection he gives us.

Philip's comments in how he comforts people at the grave of loved ones. He says, Many times I have stood over the cold ground of a Christian's grave, reading these verses, then commenting that God still watches over the life of the dear departed believer.

The body is dead, but the Christian is alive and with the Lord. His soul lives and God watches over that precious soul until the great coming day when the trumpet will sound.

And I would add beyond even that day. Even in death, all who trust in Christ will be kept safe by God until the great resurrection morning. In conclusion, I want to again emphasize that this psalm is a promise to believers only.

[40:10] Have you cast yourself on him? If not, rather than a comfort, this message should have made you envious for the protection that this great king affords to those within his kingdom.

I leave you with Jesus' words spoken to Martha at the death of Lazarus. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

Do you believe this? We're dismissed.